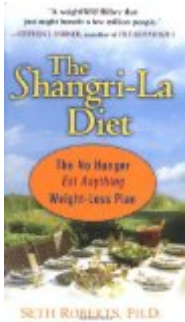


The Miracle Diet



You eat food that has calories. And you do things that burn calories. The calories left over get stored as fat. And thus, the typical advice for losing weight: eat less, exercise more. Fewer calories are eaten and more are burned and so the result is less fat. There's just one problem: that's really hard. To burn enough calories to lose a lot of weight, you really have to put an awful lot of time into it. And if you try to eat less, your body just feels hungry all the time, because it wants more.

So what if instead of forcing your body to eat less, you teach your body to *want* less. After all, it's clear that it's obesity, not lack of fat, that's the health problem. So getting your body to want less food would be a good thing. And it would make dieting incredibly easy too — instead of fighting to count calories or avoid eating certain foods, you do nothing at all; you're just not interested in eating.

It sounds like a pipe dream, but Seth Roberts argues that it's possible. Drawing on the results of a number of studies with rats, his own experiments on himself, and the best research on nutrition and weight loss, he's developed a theory of how the body decides what it feels like eating.

Our body's weight, he says, is regulated by a "set point", like the setting on a thermostat. If our weight is lower than our internal set point, we feel hungry; higher, we feel full. So if you want to weigh less, all you need to do is lower your body's set point. Your body will stop being hungry, you'll burn the fat you already have, and your weight will go down.

But how would you do that? Roberts argues that a person's set point isn't fixed, instead it goes up and down based on what they eat. After all, the whole reason the body stores up calories when food is abundant is so it can use them in "lean years", when food is scarce. So it would make sense for a person's set point to go up when food is abundant (allowing them to build up fat) and down when it's scarce (so they don't feel hungry all the time).

The problem, of course, is that food is never scarce anymore. You can always just go to McDonald's. The body is storing up for an eventuality that will never come. So how do you get it to stop? Maybe you could trick it into thinking food was scarce.

This is where Roberts's big insight comes — he argues that we use a Pavlovian sort of flavor-conditioning system to see whether food is scarce. If we eat foods frequently, we grow to like their taste, and thus our brain realizes we're eating them out of choice and raises the set point. On the other hand, if we eat new foods or foods with little taste, our brain assumes we're eating them because there's nothing else around and the set point is lowered.

And thus, the way to lower your set point: eat foods with no taste. Of course, they have to have calories as well, so Roberts's preferred suggestion is extra-light olive oil (ELOO), which is basically just oil with absolutely no taste. Your body gets the calories but it doesn't get the taste, so the set point goes lower every time you eat it.

It all seems crazy, but Roberts is sort of a crazy guy, so he decided to test it. He started taking a couple hundred tasteless calories every day. Almost immediately, he begun feeling less hungry. He started eating one meal every other day, even while still exercising, and felt great. He lost a pound of weight a week with no effort. He lost so much weight that his friends started telling him that he looked too thin, so he started taking less tasteless calories and put some weight back on. It was amazing; a diet plan unlike any other.

He told friends about it and it worked for them too. It was written up in *The New York Times* and readers wrote in with letters saying it was working for them. Blogs started to keep track of people's stories — almost all successful. And now he has a new book yesterday, *The Shangri-La Diet*, which explains how you can do it to.

The book is odd, in that it looks pretty much like any other silly diet book, but the contents are rather different. Although clearly rushed, the book has an appendix of scientific studies using rats to back up its arguments about theory and happily features the stories of people who tried the diet and found it didn't work along with those who tried the diet and found it did.

Obviously, such anecdotal evidence isn't enough to prove the system works, but it does make it intriguing enough to try. I've started taking a couple tablespoons of extra light olive oil and already I found myself skipping a meal, something I've never been able to do before. We'll see how it goes.

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